

Panglossian

by

Ray Crowther

Indeed, history is nothing more than a tableau of crimes and misfortunes.

Voltaire, L'Ingénu, Chapter 10

Prologue

I still have flashbacks and dreams about those prefatory days.

The flashbacks can arrive at any time without consideration for my safety or peace of mind. What triggers them, I cannot say. I have been crossing the road, turning a steering wheel, showering, even making love, when a slight pressure inside my head announces a flow of memories is on its way. They come as a trickle - a brief opening of a tap - and show in real-time, a few seconds of my normally inaccessible life. There is no pain and thankfully only a short lapse in concentration while I separate the past and present. I have now grown used to, and can handle, such minor debilitations.

When the manifestations of memories come in a dream, the trickle develops into an uncontrollable flood, and I am swamped with minutes or hours of personal history. When I wake, I am exhausted and emotionally confused, but I have learnt to deal with that too.

The recollections have become repetitive and unstimulating, and rarely do I glean any new fragments of information. I have wondered recently whether my perceived decline in images is real, or just my mind automatically discarding redundant material.

However, it does seem cruel and strange that my innocent past is denied me, yet the traumatic few days that led to this story have been continuously exposed in unrelenting detail.

My school and university days seem to be lost forever and most of my early working life too. Of course, the knowledge gained from distant lessons continues to be employed sub-consciously in my daily routine. It's the when, where and who that are missing, not the how and what. Time, place and person evade me. For example, I know how a petrol engine works, but not when I acquired the facts, or from where or whom. Does it really matter if Mr. Johnson (the Physics master?) taught me the principles of internal combustion in the third year of my secondary school education? Not to me - I have adjusted to the vacuum of my first twenty-five years.

Friends and family are willing and able to fill some of the gaps but I choose not to enlist their help.

Like me, perhaps your present is dominated by thoughts of the future rather than the past. I know that in making decisions I could be disadvantaged, since I cannot consult experiences of old, yet I console myself that at least I approach each new problem with a mind that is clear of earlier prejudices.

The doctors hypothesize that the earlier memories are still there - since my brain is complete and physically undamaged - so there can only be subconscious reasons why they cannot or will not be accessed. I have allowed my mind to be manipulated by hypnosis and drugs in order to satisfy the medical profession's curiosity, but each attempt has failed, and the highly-rewarded consultants have worried for me, only - cynical person that I am - until the next fee-paying appointment.

However, there will be no more appointments. Whatever the residual psychological or physiological reasons, the past no longer matters; I have a future to look forward to.

Chapter 1

FIRST FRIDAY – 3:30 p.m.

After my six-hour drive back from convalescence, it is a spur of the moment decision to visit the local library. I had borrowed a stack of books on French political history - a particular passion of mine - two weeks earlier. I haven't read them all and there is still a week remaining on the loan period, but I am passing the library so I call in. I am eager to cram my head with more knowledge of 18th century Gallic constitutional thought in the remaining two days before I go back to work, so I browse the shelves for more reading material. I am attracted to two volumes on Voltaire so I settle at a table and go through my ritual of scanning random pages to ensure that my selections are relevant to my studies. Satisfied, I head for the checkout counter and noisily place two piles of books and my library card in front of the apparently comatose middle-aged female librarian.

'Two to take out and these to return,' I say loudly, pointing to the separate heaps.

She visibly starts, and without looking up, swipes the barcode on the card with an electronic wand. The connected terminal beeps with specious satisfaction. She is about to swipe the first book when her attention moves from the display screen to me. Her look is blank and as if to mind read my observation she says, 'It's blank.'

'What's blank?' I ask innocently.

'Your library record of course,' she replies in a sleep-disturbed patronizing way. 'There's no name or address!'

'This happens often, does it?' I say, trying to echo her disdainful tone.

She chooses not to respond to my question but instead asks in the manner of a police officer accosting a suspect, 'I need to know who you are. What ID do you have with you? Passport? Driving Licence?'

'No, No,' I say with certainty and thrust my hand in my trouser back pocket searching for something with my name on it. I offer my plastic Visa card. 'How about a credit card?' I say triumphantly.

'Has it got your address on it?' my inquisitress demands.

'No, of course not; but then neither would my passport.'

That seems to stall her aggression. She looks bewildered for a moment then she bounces back. 'You'll have to come back with proof of address. You can't take these books out.'

'Then presumably as I don't exist, I can't return these books to you either?' I say argumentatively, placing my hand on the larger pile.

She taps a few keys on her keyboard, harder than seems necessary. She regards the screen, me, the books and then the screen again.

'You don't...' she begins and then realizing she is about to donate some books to me, she snatches them away. Reflexively I withdraw my hand as though snapped at by a dog, although bitch would have been a better analogy.

'Aren't you going to log them back in again?'

'I can't since they aren't booked out to you.'

It is now my turn to be officious. 'I'll need a receipt for them.'

The receipt dilemma leads to the summoning of the chief librarian - a large, balding, ruddy faced, casually dressed gentleman who I assess could be the prototypal pub landlord. His nature is more forgiving and, courtesy of his customer

relations training, he apologetically resolves the quandary in my favour - the scapegoat emerging temporarily as the defenceless, inanimate computer system without regard to its human programming or operation. I discern though, from the accusatory glance from male to female librarian, that the matter will receive further scrutiny once I have departed.

Unfazed by the time-wasting experience in the library I leave the building in high spirits. Suddenly the Voltairean adjective I had spied earlier, Panglossian - pertaining to a person who is optimistic regardless of the circumstances - appears unannounced in my head; like an omen. I consider its predictive nature and dismiss it. Despite my mysterious disappearance from the library records - I had no pessimism. Indeed, I believe I have much to look forward to: my scar is almost healed; I have two days of leisure ahead - one of which will be spent with Julie; and on Monday I return to a job that I enjoy and which has great prospects.